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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003340

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2014

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SUBJECT: CHALK ONE FOR CHAVEZ IN ANZOATEGUI

Classified By: DCM STEPHEN G. MCFARLAND FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Candidates are battling against voter apathy for gubernatorial, mayoral, and state legislative positions in the oil-rich Anzoategui State, currently controlled by the opposition. The administration's candidate, National Assembly deputy Tarek William Saab, is close to President Hugo Chavez and is a vociferous critic of the USG. The opposition's eleventh-hour candidate, mayor Antonio Barreto Sira, is popular and charismatic. The opposition, however, will have to rebound quickly from its divisions and reputation for poor leadership at the state and local levels to be competitive on October 31. Suspicion of fraud may nail the opposition's coffin by keeping their voters away from the polls, leaving a hard-core Chavez supporter as governor in a strategic state. End summary.

Atmospherics

2. (U) Intense campaigning marks the oil-rich but underdeveloped Anzoategui State, in which the opposition controls the state government and 12 of 21 mayoralties. Propaganda litters the streets, signposts, and newspapers of the Barcelona-Puerto La Cruz corridor, which contains over half of the state's 1.4 million inhabitants. In advertisements for President Hugo Chavez's favored candidates, Chavez's face is ubiquitous. At a Chavista rally site, activists wearing red gather all day and celebrate at night. Opposition supporters clad in political t-shirts distribute campaign literature at roadside stands and at red lights. While Chavista and opposition activists are so polarized that they rarely associate with each other, most state residents lack confidence in all politicians, according to government, business, and academic officials.

The Gubernatorial Candidates

3. (C) Chavez's candidate is National Assembly deputy Tarek William Saab Halabi (MVR), an outspoken critic of the USG who has made a national issue out of his revoked US visa. Saab, of Lebanese extraction, was denied a visa in 1997 because of his links to terrorist activities. He also violated the terms of a 2000 waiver he received for an official visit to Washington. A former human rights lawyer and poet, Saab won the trust of the President when he visited Hugo Chavez in prison in 1992. Saab hails from the city of El Tigre in central Anzoategui and returns from Caracas on the weekends to campaign. His campaign cites the "North American Opinion" polling firm's report that he has the support of 67.5 percent of the state.

4. (U) Opposition candidate Antonio Barreto Sira (AD) is a longtime politician and the popular mayor of Freitas, the fifth-most populous of Anzoategui's 21 municipalities. (The opposition currently controls 12 of the 21 municipalities.) According to the host of a political television show on the local channel Telecaribe, the public "is drawn" to the charismatic Barreto. State director of Primero Justicia Gustavo Marciano told PolOff Barreto's popularity in Freitas stems from his construction of grandiose public works projects--including a ten-lane, olympic-sized swimming pool--with revenue contributed by oil companies. According to the pollster "Data Consult," Barreto Sira on October 24 had a five percentage-point lead on Saab. About 18 percent of those polled, however, remained undecided or failed to respond.

Opposition Discord

5. (U) The splintered opposition did not rally behind Barreto Sira until the night of the CNE-imposed October 21 deadline to drop out of the race. Candidates Barreto Sira

and incumbent governor David de Lima--a former Chavista now affiliated with MAS--had agreed that they each would choose

one firm to poll the public, and the least popular candidate would withdraw, according to National Assembly deputy Alfonso Marquina (AD). On October 20, the press announced that both polls had picked Barreto Sira. Meanwhile, David de Lima's secretary told the Embassy that the rivals were still

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negotiating behind closed doors. According to the tabloid Tal Cual, De Lima decided to withdraw in exchange for AD's support for some undisclosed mayoral candidates.

16. (U) In the local elections, each municipality has several candidates on the ballot, many of whom have chosen to stay in the race. For example, there are 15 mayoral candidates in the opposition-dominated municipality of Urbaneja, including the state party leaders of Primero Justicia and COPEI. Three of these 15 candidates are sympathetic to the administration, although in each case of such a divided "oficialista" ticket, Chavez's support for only one candidate is manifest.

Opposition Mismanagement

17. (C) The former head of Puerto La Cruz's chamber of commerce described de Lima to PolOff as a governor with few accomplishments. De Lima's tourism director blamed "political instability" for the state's inability to attract vacationers, although the state, with stunning ocean and desert scenery in the north and the Orinoco River in the south, has significant potential. On October 25, 120 police officers demanding unpaid benefits raided the governor's house, apprehended his bodyguards, and fired shots in the air to drive the intervening police chief from the scene. The officers remain on strike.

18. (U) Waste has characterized the term of office of Urbaneja's opposition mayor, who also has declined to seek reelection. According to Primera Justicia's Marcano, Urbaneja has a larger law enforcement budget than Caracas's Baruta municipality, yet its streets are unsafe.

Comment

19. (C) That Saab enjoys the support of 67.5 percent of the electorate in Anzoategui stretches the imagination. Abstention is likely to be high among sympathizers of Chavez and the opposition. Nonetheless, Saab will likely carry the day because the specter of fraud will probably keep more opposition than pro-government voters away from the polls. And, Saab has been campaigning for nearly one year -- he has worked hard. The opposition may also have trouble retaining a majority of the mayoralties. End comment.

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